



# An Experiment in Interpreting Pre-Modern Heroic Narrative

Rodger Wilkie  
St. Thomas University  
wilkie@stu.ca

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**Abstract:** The epic hero is a cyborg. This apparently anachronistic claim agrees both with contemporary definitions of “cyborg” and with the construction of heroes in pre-modern epic. The paper offers a test case in Cethern Mac Fintain, a minor character in the Irish Táin Bó Cuailnge(Cattle Raid of Cooley), who after being wounded in battle is fused to his chariot in order to continue fighting. The argument here is expanded to the Táin more broadly as well as to the Iliad and Beowulf; it concludes that the post-human figure of the cyborg provides a useful lens for examining the intersection of biology and technology in epic heroism.

## Introduction

The epic hero is a cyborg.

But that's impossible: epic heroes have existed since the earliest Gilgamesh narratives, with histories going back over 4,000 years—or, by the strictest definition, since the earliest versions of the Homeric poems, which are about 1,000 years more recent; the term “cyborg,” on the other hand, has existed only since the mid-twentieth century. At first pass, therefore, the central claim of this paper is clearly anachronistic. And yet—the epic hero is a cyborg. So how does one reconcile the anachronistic nature of the claim to the assertion itself? How does one answer a charge that every undergraduate student of ancient or medieval culture has been conditioned to guard against?

Two responses come to mind.

The claim only looks anachronistic.

Yeah? So what?

Perhaps the best way of pursuing the first response is to consider what the term cyborg means. The word itself, a compound of “cybernetic organism,” was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, in a paper aimed at adapting humans to

space exploration. Clynes and Kline define cyborgs as “self-regulating man-machine systems.”[1] More recently, Donna Haraway has defined this creature as “the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy” that exists “when two kinds of boundaries are simultaneously problematic: 1) that between animals (or other organisms) and humans, and 2) that between self-controlled, self-governing machines (automatons) and organisms, especially humans (models of autonomy).”[2] More recently still, David Hess, in his discussion of low-tech cyborgs, has defined the cyborg as “any identity between machine and human or any conflation of the machine/human boundary.”[3] What these and other definitions have in common is the idea of the interface between the organic and the technological, and their configuration into a single system. This configuration will function as a working definition of the term.

As the word cyborg is a recent coinage, it is unsurprising that the figure for which it stands tends to be viewed through the lens of recent technology. And seen through that lens, the figure is common. According to Chris Hables Gray, Steven Mentor, and Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera, many cyborgs live among us: “Anyone with an artificial organ, limb or supplement (like a pacemaker), anyone reprogrammed to resist disease (immunized) or drugged to think/behave/feel better (psychopharmacology) is technically a cyborg.”[4] This range of everyday cyborgs suggests possibilities from other periods—periods perhaps lacking in the scientific and science-fictional discourses in which cyborgs were first conceptualized, yet in which the relationship between people and technology had already produced otherwise impossible forms.

As noted, Clynes and Kline were looking to the future rather than the past. However, though the term cyborg is not old, the relationships underlying it are. Forest Pyle, for example, notes that our concern with artificial or artificially enhanced beings dates to Frankenstein.[5] Jennifer González looks to the dawn of the industrial age, in her discussion of *L'Horlogère* (The Mistress of Horology), an anonymous eighteenth-century French engraving depicting a woman and a clock merged to form “a single entity.”[6] But cyborg figures from the pre-industrial period appear rare at first glance. One exception is Núadu in the Irish mythological tale *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Battle of Moytura)—Núadu whose hand, having been cut off in battle, is replaced by a silver one installed by the physician Dían Cécht.[7] Another is Icarus, who on donning wings forged by his craftsman father Daedalus, ventures briefly into the realm of cyborghood—functions briefly as a “self-regulating man-machine system”—before plunging to a very organic demise. In these cases, human and technology, the born and the made, merge, with the technology mediating the human’s participation in a sphere or activity from which it would otherwise be excluded. The question of anachronism is thus moot: if cyborgian relationships between the biological and the technological can be demonstrated in the case of epic heroes, then epic heroes can be understood as cyborgs.[8] The claim, in other words, only looks anachronistic.[9]

But even if it is—so what?

Let's play.

Let's play a game.

Let's play a game of What If:

What if the epic hero were a cyborg? What if his armaments were not merely things that he used (tools), but rather components in a biological-technological hybrid identity? How would this understanding affect the reading of these characters, and of the narratives in which they appear? How, for example, would it affect interpretations of heroes and heroism; of the agency or autonomy of heroes, and their relationships to the societies for which they fight; of the tensions and instabilities that often exist within these perennially fascinating, often unstable, and frequently de-stabilizing figures? How, in turn, might the discourses of science and technology studies contribute to an understanding and appreciation of the mythic and the literary? Does epic hero as cyborg, epic hero as hybrid, demand a hybrid reading, a cyborg reading: a rejection of the boundaries that traditionally separate academic disciplines? In this context, the very idea of anachronism may signal a staking out of borders that are ripe, maybe over-ripe, for transgression.

#### Test Case

A test case might be useful—in this case a minor figure from the medieval Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Cattle Raid of Cooley).[10] The *Táin* is the longest and best known narrative of the Ulster Cycle, a group of tales centering around the men of Ulster prior to the arrival of Christianity in Ireland, their court at Emain Macha, their king Conchobar, and their greatest hero Cú Chulainn. The epic tells of the war between Ulster and Connacht, the latter led by its titular king Ailill and his powerful wife Medb, over the queen's desire to steal the great brown bull of Ulster. Incapacitated by a curse that leaves them suffering pangs akin to childbirth, the men of Ulster must sit out much of the fighting, leaving Cú Chulainn to hold the border alone. Toward the end of the narrative, they begin to rouse and join the fighting, and the epic culminates in a battle that leaves not only the armies decimated but also the land itself permanently changed.

While much has been written about the *Táin* generally, and about specific major characters such as Cú Chulainn, Medb, Fergus, and the goddess MorRígan, many of the saga's minor characters have received little critical attention. One such character is Cethern Mac Fintain. Cethern appears in only four tales out of eighty in the Ulster Cycle,[11] and in all but his appearance in the *Táin* is little more than a name rounding out lists of names.[12] And yet this one fully realized appearance is both startling in itself and potentially informative as to the nature of epic heroism not just in the *Táin* specifically but also in heroic literature at large. The transformation that Cethern undergoes, while unique in its extremity, offers valuable insight into the relationship between epic heroes and their armaments, and may serve as a metaphor for the constellation of elements that come together in narrative after narrative to form the figure of the warrior hero.

In his appearance in the *Táin*, set prior to the culminating events while Cú Chulainn, exhausted and wounded, has withdrawn to receive healing, Cethern steps into the principal hero's place. He charges into the opposing ranks composed not just of the men of Connacht but of all the armies of Ireland excluding that of Ulster, but is severely wounded, emerging from battle with his entrails lying about his feet" ("conā inathar ima chosa").[13] He is inspected by several physicians, all of whom pronounce him mortally wounded and all of whom receive fatal blows for being the bearers of bad news.[14] Finally, the physician Fíngin presents him with the choice "either to lie sick for a year and then survive, or straightaway to have sufficient strength for three days and three nights to attack his enemies." [15] That Cethern chooses the latter is no surprise; his quintessentially heroic decision is similar to those of both Cú Chulainn in his youthful taking up of arms and Achilles in his choice to fight at Troy—to opt for a short heroic life, in preference to a long life of obscurity—but the enactment of his choice is unusual. Cethern is first given a mash of cow marrow, and then sleeps for a full day and night. The following day, his broken and missing ribs are replaced with the ribs of his chariot frame. His wife gives him his weapons, and finally he "attacked the host then with the framework of his chariot bound to his belly" ("fosnópair in slog iārom ɍ a chreit a c[h]arpait i nn-imnайдm fria thairr").[16] Sayers notes that Cethern's mash of cow bones "recalls the Celtic cauldron of rejuvenation and plenty," and that "This absorption of animate power is followed by the assumption of inanimate yet highly symbolic strength" in the binding of the chariot frame to himself "as a gigantic substitute for armour,"[17] suggesting as well that the episode "contain[s] the motif of self-sacrifice in addition to the other parallels of transference, interchange, and reconstitution." [18] Dooley sees his wounds as bodily inscriptions, "graphs of Cethern's heroic deeds," and his reassembly as an interpretation of those deeds in the context of heroic narrative.[19] As he is prepared for battle, Cethern wilfully sacrifices his humanity, first by his absorption of the animal marrow, and then by the insertion of artificial ribs: components of a machine of war. He is transformed into a man/weapon, made physically one with his chariot. Moreover, even discounting the fact that he is killed the first day he rejoins the fight, his three-day expiration date defines him as disposable, or in other words as valuable only in his immediate heroic context.

One might, then, consider Cethern as a reflection of the type of heroism exemplified by epic heroes generally—and here it is significant that he is acting explicitly as a stand-in for the hero of the epic: his choice dehumanizes him, reconfiguring chariot and man into a single unit whose value exists only in its capacity to fight. In this sense, the impossible restructuring of Cethern's body functions as a stripping of illusion, a revelation of the hero as a figure occupying the border between the human and the non-human—his nature as not just born but made, as not just man but also machine and therefore tool. In Cethern, we see the complicity of society in the construction of the hero. In Cú Chulainn's case, the king does not know that the boy to whom he grants arms is choosing a short life in return for fame; Cethern is literally rebuilt to be

short-lived but deadly, and the rebuilding is carried out by members of his society, specifically by those with the technical knowledge to get the job done. In fact, Cethern is a cyborg—his body merged with the body of the chariot, the “machine/human boundary” utterly conflated and the resulting “man-machine system” rendered autonomous within the parameters of its design, namely, combat.

#### A Broader Application

Yet Cethern’s example alone cannot make the case for the epic hero as cyborg. To make that case, the apparently unique extremity of Cethern’s hybridization must be accounted for: no other pre-modern hero of whom I am aware undergoes so complete an integration with the technology of his time. How, then, might one claim that epic heroes in general are cyborgs? As the figure of Cethern makes clear, the obvious point of organic/technological interface where the warrior hero is concerned, is armaments. Not only does the hero’s relationship with his armaments constitute him as a cyborg, but the tales in which he appears also constitute him, through their portrayal of that relationship, as a being apart from his fellow humans: *Arma virumque scribo*,[20] and the arms of which I write transform the man who dons them.

The means of transformation are interesting in context of the epic arming type-scene and the notion of liminality—both the liminal zone and the liminal state. Examples of liminal zone are the space between Troy and the Greek camp in the *Iliad*, Grendel’s mere in *Beowulf*, or in the *Táin*, the space between the armies on Muirthemne Plain or any ford in which Cú Chulainn meets an opponent. Van Gennep notes that whoever crosses into such a zone “finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds.”[21] Or in terms more directly applicable to heroic action, “The necessary horizontal plane of adventure begins where settlement and the solidities of culture, political order, and secular authority end.”[22] When the hero goes to work, that is, the place to which he goes is profoundly unstable.

The arming scene itself is thus a preliminal ritual, in which the hero moves into a liminal state appropriate to the space he is about to enter. Much of *Iliad* 19 is devoted to Achilles’s preparations for combat: his donning of his god-forged armor,[23] his selection of weapons,[24] and his mounting of his chariot.[25] As regards the armor, the best example is the shield forged by Hephaestus[26]—a shield whose imagery encompasses all levels of the human world at war and at peace[27] and that thus associates its bearer, both by virtue of its origin and by virtue of its imagery, with a superhuman or extra-human order of reality. Similarly, before *Beowulf* descends into Grendel’s mother’s mere, the most explicitly liminal location in the Anglo-Saxon epic, the hero’s arming is described in exquisite, though realistic detail. The account of his donning of the boar-crested helmet is instructive:

The shining helm shielded the head, that helm which had to stir up the lake-bottom, seek the surging water adorned with treasure, wrapped in lordly bands, as the

weapon-smith had worked it in days of old, formed with wonders, adorned with boar-figures, so that afterward neither brand nor battle-sword might bite it.[28]

Similarly, the sword lent to Beowulf for the occasion is also given full, if somewhat ironic, attention:

The name of that hafted sword was Hrunting; that was one of a kind among ancient treasures; the edge was iron, set about with serpent-patterns, hardened in battle-blood; never in battle had it failed any man who gripped it with his hands, when he dared to undertake dreadful journeys, a hostile folk-stead; that was not the first time that it had to do a glorious deed.[29]

The arming of Cú Chulainn is also narrated in detail just after he has been healed by his divine father Lugh and just prior to one of the young hero's most spectacular distortions.[30] His body is clothed in twenty-seven shirts and bound with strings and ropes intended to hold him together so that neither his body nor his mind disintegrates when his warp spasm comes upon him. He is decked out in hardened leather and assorted finery and takes up an extravagant array of weapons including nine each of swords, spears, javelins, and shields.

Then he put on his head his crested war-helmet of battle and strife and conflict. From it was uttered the shout of a hundred warriors with a long-drawn-out cry from every corner and angle of it. For there used to cry from it alike goblins and sprites, spirits of the glen and demons of the air before him and above him and around him wherever he went, prophesying the shedding of the blood of warriors and champions.[31]

Over all goes a cloak given him by his Otherworldly tutor Scáthach.[32] As with Achilles's armour, the associations of Cú Chulainn's armaments with the non-human realm are hard to miss. The helmet seems to be associated with the panic-inspiring war goddess Nemain as the conditions under which she comes to his aid are similar to those created by the helmet itself, namely, the noise of his war cry. Thus, by putting on the helmet, Cú Chulainn is associating himself more strongly still with forces antithetical to an ordered human society. As for the ropes that bind the raging hero, these bear direct comparison with the ribs of Cethern's chariot. In either episode, the warrior's rage, and his unstable biological parts, are contained within a martial structure: the chariot frame in Cethern's case and in Cú Chulainn's, the hardened shirts over which the ropes are placed.[33] Both characters are literally held together by human artifice—both constructed and directed toward the only end for which, by virtue of both their temperaments and their current configurations, they are suited.

In each case, the hero is publicly seen to suit up for his encounter with the liminal: the putting on of armour and weapons thus functions as a ritual of separation, and signifies a change of what van Gennep refers to as "social and magico-religious position." Or simply, as Turner phrases it, "Ritual is transformative."[34] By means of this particular ritual of separation, the hero moves into a different position in regard to his relationship with the world; he becomes something other than what he was. To

borrow another and oft-cited line from Turner, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”[35] The hero’s armour is a visible sign that he is no longer bound by the rules and mores of day-to-day life.[36]

In arming, the hero thus undergoes a change of state: his capacities are augmented, both enhanced and contained, by the technology he adopts. Such an intimate augmentation by means of weapons—in donning armour the hero is literally inside the technology—may be different from the cyborgs of science fiction, or of contemporary military research, in degree, but not in kind: this is as close a relationship between the born and the made as is generally possible in the worlds of pre-modern epic.

One possible objection to this claim is that, unlike Cethern, epic heroes often fight very well without their augmentations, as Cú Chulainn does against Fráech, as Beowulf does against Grendel, and as Achilles does against whoever stands between him and the body of Patroclus. Addressing this objection requires a further look into cyborg theory.

Not all cyborgs are alike. Gray, Mentor, and Figueroa-Sarriera, referring to real and potential cyborgs, identify four categories: restorative, normalizing, reconfiguring, and enhancing. The first two do not concern us as they are primarily intended to restore lost functions, limbs, organs, and appearances[37]—although Núadu would have found the restorative category interesting. On the other hand, cyborgs of the third category, the reconfiguring cyborgs, are “posthuman creatures equal to but different from humans, like what one is now when one is interacting with other creatures in cyberspace or, in the future, the type of modifications proto-humans will undergo to live in space or under the sea.”[38] It is to this category that one can assign Cethern, whose body has been modified far beyond normality to function in a hostile environment—the battlefield—to the extent that he is only ambiguously human in the conventional sense.[39] This leaves the fourth category, the enhancing cyborgs, which Gray et al. identify as “the aim of most military and industrial research.” The purpose of this type of cyborg is to improve human performance through what might be termed intimate technological involvement, “from factories controlled by a handful of ‘worker-pilots’ and infantrymen in mind-controlled exoskeletons to the dream many computer scientists have—downloading their consciousness into immortal computers.”[40] Many epic heroes, having donned their armaments in a pre-liminal ritual, fit into this category, as people whose abilities have been enhanced through the medium of technology and whose identities as heroes depend at least in part on their relationships with that equipment—a dependence supported by the sheer ubiquity of epic arming scenes and the close relationships that heroes often bear to their hardware.

As noted above, though, Gray and his colleagues are primarily concerned with real or potentially real cyborgs. Coming at the cyborg from the angle of popular culture, a body of discourses in which it has been a common figure since before the term was coined, Mark Oehlert proposes three types of comic-book cyborg: the simple controller,

the bio-tech integrator, and the genetic cyborg.[41] As might be expected, the last two do not concern this study as the technology upon which each is based was not available to the conceptual worlds in which ancient and medieval epics were composed. In the case of the first, however, that absence is not so clear. A simple controller is a cyborg resulting from the augmentation of a human with artificial parts. The parts may be internal as with the hero Wolverine, whose skeleton has been augmented with metal and who has been given retractable metal claws, or they may be external or even detachable as with Iron Man, whose iron suit with its modular attachments provides him with superhuman abilities while also protecting his defective heart.[42] In such cyborgs, human and non-human parts are discrete, and the human part is in sometimes tenuous control; the non-human augments the human and is subordinate to it, while still constituting an essential component of the overall identity or self of the (hu)man-machine system.

Once the reader gets past a possible reluctance to include figures such as Wolverine and Iron Man in the same category as epic heroes—or past a more formal reluctance predicated upon disciplinary boundaries—parallels between Oehlert's simple controller cyborg and Cethern become apparent. That both Wolverine and Cethern have technologically augmented skeletons, and that those apparently inextricable artificial augmentations are integral to their abilities to function, are obvious examples. Regarding Cú Chulainn, Achilles, Beowulf, and a wide array of other epic heroes, on the other hand, Iron Man may provide a more relevant model. That his iron suit functions as armour may be too obvious to mention, but the role of that armour in the construction of a cyborg self is not. In both epic and pop culture cases, the hero's body is, as noted above, contained within the technology, which in itself forms a boundary between the character's living flesh and the world in which he moves and fights. Moreover, in each case the armaments are unique to the character, and thus linked to his own uniqueness. And in every case, the donning of the armour marks a change of state, indicated by the preliminal arming rite in the epics, and by the change of names in the case of the comic-book hero: Iron Man, when not suited up, is known as Tony Stark. The character's identity is thus mediated by his relationship with the technology he employs.

One possible objection to the depiction of epic heroes as cyborgs is that they do not, as noted above, always use their armor and weapons, while Iron Man cannot function as Iron Man without his iron suit. It is not necessary, however, for the hero's relationship with his augmentations to be permanent as, for example, Wolverine's is. Gray et al. are quite clear that the human-technology interface need not be everlasting for the resulting system to be classified as a cyborg. They identify a fifth category that cuts across the boundaries of the four mentioned above: the intermittent cyborgs, people who merge with technology in intimate but temporary relationships, such as a dialysis patient, or a pilot wired into a cockpit.[43] The defining factor is not that the organic/technological interface be permanent, but simply that it exist, and that the

resultant system be qualitatively different from its constituent parts, and autonomous within the parameters of its construction. Alternately, we might employ N. Katherine Hayles's category of the metaphoric cyborg, a category she sees as "including the computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber optic microscopy during an operation,"[44] or in other words anyone who temporarily links with technology to engage in an activity that would otherwise be difficult or impossible, as Beowulf, for example, elects to use weapons and armour against the dragon, an opponent he could not have taken on barehanded, and as Cú Chulainn uses the gae bolga,[45] apparently a barbed and many-pointed spear-like weapon that he propels through the water with his foot, to overcome opponents who might otherwise get the better of him. Thus, taking the foregoing categorizations into account, one might classify the epic hero as an intermittent or metaphoric cyborg of either the enhancing or simple controller type.

### So What?

So the hero is a cyborg. But what do cyborgs do, culturally speaking, that might be relevant to ancient and medieval epic? One possibility is that they offer a glimpse into the link between war and the technology of war—and the tensions implicit in that connection. Its configuration as both biological and technological provides a vehicle for exploring the reciprocal relationships between people and their machines.[46] For instance, the link between the hero and the smith may be relevant here as the smith—divine or otherwise—is definitively linked with technology. One might remember that Cú Chulainn during his raging distortion can be likened to metal on the smith's forge,[47] and that Achilles, Aeneas, and Beowulf all bear weapons and/or armor associated with divine smiths. Epic draws attention to the relationship between heroic action and weapons technology, acknowledging the intimate role that such technology plays in constructing a heroic identity, and we must therefore consider this link to what might be termed the epitome of culture: the act of crafting formless metal into something that is not just a tool, which would be human enough, but into something that is also an aesthetic object. Where the hero's rage, most spectacularly represented by Cú Chulainn's oft-discussed distortion, or by Achilles's wild assaults on the trench in which Patroclus's body lies and on the River Scamander, represents the disordered or disordering facet of his character, his weaponry, and its associations with craft or technology,[48] represent culture and thus order, placing the hero himself on a border in which the two opposing states are not only coexistent but also symbiotic—the rage giving volition and direction to the technology, which in turn enhances the effectiveness and reach of the rage. This is a cyborg state: the body, interfaced with state-of-the-art weapons technology, becomes more effective in its given task than it could otherwise be, while the image of the cyborg has historically recurred at moments of radical social and cultural change. From bestial monstrosities, to unlikely montages of body and machine parts, to electronic implants, imaginary representations of cyborgs take over when traditional bodies fail. In other words, when the current

ontological model of human being does not fit a new paradigm, a hybrid model of existence is required to encompass a new, complex and contradictory lived experience. The cyborg body thus becomes the historical record of changes in human perception.[61]

González is interested in the images of cyborgs produced since the dawn of the industrial age, during which machines came to dominate human life and thought in a manner previously unknown. Yet the tensions underlying the conflicts in epic literature also embody such a potential moment of “social and cultural change,” and the body of the hero most certainly takes over “when traditional bodies fail.” The hero arises in response to a threat to the existing social order, and the traditional human body does not fit the paradigm of heroic action; it is incapable of performing at the level required for the preservation of the society under threat. Thus, insofar as “a new social space requires a new social being,”[62] and insofar as a combat zone can be considered a “new social space,” existing outside the apparently stable social centre and working to rules often antithetical to those of the social centre, the epic hero is exactly the kind of new social being required by the new social space. “In other words, the cyborg body marks the boundaries of that which is the underlying but unrecognized structure of a given historical consciousness. It turns the inside out.”[63] Thus, the often inhuman and dehumanizing violence that lies at the heart of the hero’s rage, his unique and wild energy, is reflected by his technological attachments, configured as they are for often superhuman violence: the slaying of a dragon, for example, or the taking on of an entire army. His heroism is, paradoxically, both integral to his character and, in a real physical sense, modular—prosthetic. In either case, it is not entirely or purely human.

### Conclusion

It is with this problematization of the boundaries of the human that I conclude. As Pyle observes, “when we make cyborgs . . . we make and, on occasion, unmake our conceptions of ourselves.”[64] He goes on to suggest that the construction of cyborgs “means the unmaking of the human through the anxious recognition that both were assembled in the first place.”[65] The constructedness of the category human is foregrounded by the construction of cyborgs that, in themselves, challenge the definition of the human by making us aware that there is a definition. And if humanity itself is a constructed concept, an occupant of one side of an arbitrary border, as the figure of the cyborg suggests, then all notions of purity, hybridity, and fixity are also revealed as arbitrary. Seen through the critical lens of the cyborg, the epic hero suggests a similar realization: What the hero is, is what his society has constructed him, in some cases literally built him, to be. He occupies a border between agent and tool, born and made, largely by embodying that border himself. As Haraway observes, “Cyborgs are about particular sorts of breached boundaries that confuse a specific historical people’s stories about what counts as distinct categories crucial to that culture’s natural-technical evolutionary narratives.”[66] They make us uncertain about

the borders of the self, about what constitutes selfhood—the contents or referent of those apparently simplest of words: “we,” “I.” Heroes are both born and made. They preserve the integrity of their societies by sacrificing themselves to the shifting needs of violent confrontation, and in so doing become other—or illustrate by their exaggerated example, our own everyday alterity. Cethern is an extreme, though by no means unique, embodiment of this sacrifice. In trying to protect the breached border of his own land, he allows the border of his body to be breached. He is changed beyond any purely biological image of humanity, but changed in a way that reflects that most conspicuous of all epic type scenes: the arming of the hero. In becoming a cyborg himself, Cethern reveals the cyborg nature of other warriors, illustrating their mixed nature through his own hybrid body.

#### Appendix 1

a. Following is a description of Cú Chulainn’s warp spasm that accompanies the arming scene under discussion:

His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence a gap in a hedge. If a noble apple-tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it, but an apple would have stayed impaled on each separate hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above his head. The hero’s light rose from his forehead, as long and as thick as a hero’s fist and it was as long as his nose, and he was filled with rage as he wielded the shields and urged on the charioteer and cast sling-stones at the host. As high, as thick, as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood which rose up from the very top of his head and dissolved into a dark magical mist like the smoke of a palace when a king comes to be waited on in the evening of a winter’s day. (TBC1 2243-78; O’Rahilly 187)[67]

b. The following passage illustrates the disordering or inverting nature of the warp spasm. The speaker in this passage is Fergus MacRoich, recounting an early episode in which Cú Chulainn, as a boy, flies into a rage:

Thereupon he became distorted. His hair stood on end so that it seemed as if each separate hair on his head had been hammered into it. You would have thought that there was a spark of fire on each single hair. He closed one eye so that it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as large as the mouth of a mead-goblet. He laid bare from [sic] his jaw to his ear and opened his mouth rib-wide[?] so that his internal organs were visible. The champion’s light rose above his head.

Then he attacked the boys. He knocked down fifty of them before they reached the gate of Emain. Nine of them came past me and Conchobar where we were playing chess. Cú Chulainn leapt over the chess-board in pursuit of the nine.[68] (TBC1 428-38; O’Rahilly 137)

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#### Notes

Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995), 30. ↗

Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 139. ↗

David J. Hess, "On Low-Tech Cyborgs," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, 373. ↗

Chris Hables Gray, Steven Mentor, and Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera, "Cyborgology: Constructing the Knowledge of Cybernetic Organisms," *The Cyborg Handbook*, 2–3. ↗

Forest Pyle, "Making Cyborgs, Making Humans: Of Terminators and Blade Runners," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 124. ↗

Jennifer González, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, 541. ↗

Elizabeth Gray, trans., Cath Maige Tuired: *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1982), 25, 28–30. ↗

Gray, Mentor, and Figueroa-Sarriera might disagree, noting that we are aware of relationships that our ancestors could not conceptualize—that our awareness of our relationship with technology makes us, or many of us, cyborgs (Gray, Mentor, and Figueroa-Sarriera, "Cyborgology," 6). However, in insisting on our awareness of relationships alien to pre-Modern conceptual frameworks, Gray and his colleagues ignore the fact that modern people themselves may never think about the integration of technology into their bodies. Awareness of the concept cyborg is not a precondition for cyborghood. ↗

N. Katherine Hayles, in her contribution to the recent inaugural issue of the journal *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, addresses this matter as well, pointing out to "those who wonder if juxtaposing posthumanism and premodern studies invites anachronism," that "'human' is a historically specific construction that has changed over time, and that the function of 'posthuman' is not so much to denominate a particular configuration as to open areas of contestation in which one or more qualities associated with the 'human' come under challenge" (269). ↗

The saga survives in two recensions. The first is preserved in two manuscripts: the eleventh–twelfth century *Lebor na hUidre* (Book of the Dun Cow) and the fourteenth-century *Leabhar Buidhe Lecain* (Yellow Book of Lecan). The second recension is contained in the twelfth-century *Lebor Laighech* (Book of Leinster). The language first recession has been dated to the ninth century, with some poetic passages evoking a still earlier dialect (Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cuailnge* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006], 5). ↗

Barbara Hillers, "The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle," in *Ulidia: The Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales. Belfast and Emain Macha, 8–12 April 1994*, ed. J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast: December Publications, 1994), 103. <sup>14</sup>

See Appendix 1.a. <sup>15</sup>

Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge Recension 1* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), 209, l. 3173. All quotations from the *Táin*, unless otherwise specified, are taken from this edition. Translations are O'Rahilly's. Line numbers refer to this edition and not necessarily to any manuscript. <sup>16</sup>

Ibid., ll. 3176–3201. <sup>17</sup>

Ibid., 213, ll. 3296–98: "huthar eo cend mbliadna ḡ beathu dó íarom fa nert trí lá ḡ trí n-aidchi fo chétóir do imbert fora náimdib." <sup>18</sup>

Ibid., ll. 3300–14. <sup>19</sup>

William Sayers, "Fergus and the Cosmogonic Sword," *History of Religions* 24 (1985–1986): 32. <sup>20</sup>

Ibid. <sup>21</sup>

Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, 34–36. <sup>22</sup>

"I write of arms and the man." <sup>23</sup>

Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 17–18. <sup>24</sup>

Dean Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 151.

<sup>14</sup> Homer, *Homeri Ilias*, ed. Thomas W. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 19.1ff. Translations from Homer, where used, are taken from Robert Fagles, *The Iliad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990). Line numbers are given from the Greek text. <sup>25</sup>

Homer, *Iliad*, 19.387ff. <sup>26</sup>

Homer, *Iliad*, 19.392ff. <sup>27</sup>

Homer, *Iliad*, 18.490ff. <sup>28</sup>

C. M. Bowra, *Homer* (Bristol: Gerald Duckworth, 1972), 148; James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in The Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 187–88. <sup>29</sup>